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MODERN ICELAND.

BY

PROF. CHAS. SPRAGUE SMITH.

History is the resultant of the interaction of two forces, man and his environment. In the pathless forests, the closely pressed, massive firs, birches and maples with their tufted crests, forming a canopy one hundred feet above us, shut away well-nigh completely all of earth and all of sky. All sense of direction is lost. The level sun cannot force its rays through the interspaces in the wall of trees; the vertical sun, unless poised absolutely above our heads, cannot indicate to us the mid-point in its diurnal arc. We ask of the blue patches of cloudland above and of the dim aisles about us in vain whither we shall turn.

But the experienced woodsman, allowing his eye to follow the ragged trunk of the birch or the firm brown bole of the maple, observes carefully in which direction the souple crests bend.

"Yonder lies our course," he says, "for the trees bend eastward." We know almost a sense of pity, of fellow-feeling, for our brothers the children of the forest, when we also observe that, despite their erect might, the proud crests have been compelled to do obeisance to a superior force. For, unless our life course has been very brief, we also, amidst all the pride of conscious strength and eager insatiate aspiration, have been forced

to bow. From whatsoever source or sources the race dispersion moved, that has given its populations to the two hemispheres, every pebble in the stream-bed, every zephyr that ruffled the surface, every influence from without, whether silent or sonorous in its manifestation, has left its impress. Thus children of one stock, one blood, one heritage, became differentiated into races widely separate in character and customs.

And when the mighty west wind sends forth its phalanxes and, in charge on charge, urges on the assault upon the firm erectness of the forest kings, we sit beneath their shadow, in the safe shelter of their marshalled hosts, and listen to the sounds of the conflict. Bending before the shock of the assault, the tree-tops hold the winds and, as it were, repel them. And the hoarse voices die gradually away into a distant moan or forest murmur. Then anew, far above, we hear the advance of the vanguard, a whirring as of wings in the foliage, growing clearer, louder each instant; until, with a roar, as when the surf breaks upon a rocky coast, the attack is renewed. The multitudinous crisp fluttering of the leaves, intermingled with the hoarse creaking of the boughs, follows, and the force of the onset is again spent.

Even more of charm is offered to the student of history. From the safe eyrie of the present, he can look backward and downward upon the struggles of the past. There man wrestling with nature succumbed. Here in azure girdled, azure roofed Hellas, he led nature captive, reading her laws of beauty and immortalizing them in marble and words.

And, as the student's eye sweeps with affectionate in-

terest the horizon, it turns at last northward. As from an inexhaustible spring of native unsullied energy, there flowed southward, during the first centuries of our era, streams of humanity to revitalize, renew the decadent, exhausted South. So through myriad waterways the fertilizing Nile is led into the parched fields of Egypt.

And amongst all the Germanic tribes, the northernmost perhaps contributed most of stimulus, most of energy, tipped with the fire of enthusiasm, and held to the tense bow-string of determination. Away it whirrs and wherever it falls, its magnificent life is infused into the dormant or decadent societies.

Instinctively we ask, if the Norse energy transplanted could and did communicate such vitality to the masses of life with which it was brought into contact, what did it effect at home?

Norway cannot answer this question, for the wasting of its best life in wars, or the loss occasioned by emigration, combined with other forces, operating from without, stunted and held back the natural development.

Iceland answers it. That answer is distinct among histories, alone among literatures, rugged, masculine, powerful. The Norse life found here its just expression almost entirely free from foreign influence. And, as in the forest, nay, more than in any forest, that struggle between the creature, the life, and its environment is filled for us with human interest.

It was not a fertile promised land, not even a rock-bound New England, that the Norseman discovered and occupied. It was an old battle-ground, where the

giants of frost and fire had been contending ever since it emerged from the sea. Seamed, scarred, blasted, the pores of earth sealed with congealed lava or choked with volcanic sand, that whole island the giant of fire claimed as his domain. Only a narrow interrupted strip of verdure surrounded the waste central plateau. The frost giant, silently, constantly at work, hooded the volcanoes with ice-caps, or ever their fires were extinguished, and, compressing the summer within the narrowest limits, chilled the heart of nature. Her enfeebled vital-force could only yield a close short grass and a low shrubbery of birch, fir, or willow.

In favored localities the kernels deposited in her bosom might be warmed into living-life, and green spires of grain rise through the broken soil.

But such conditions were rarely present, and fruit or timber-yielding tree was unknown. No wealth from soil, none stored up in the veins of the mountains; a region exposed to the inclemencies of a northern winter, tempered by the equatorial stream, it seemed rather adapted by nature to become the Labrador of the Old World. We might have expected that the fisherman would build his hut upon its shores, and perhaps pasture his sheep in its intervalles. But that men in numbers, sufficient to form a state, should voluntarily select this island as their home, with the whole world open to them, seems indeed surprising.

The struggle with the environment was a protracted one. Only Norse energy could have wrested from the surrounding conditions so much of permanent value in manly effort and achievements. Iceland had organized a united democratic state, controlled by a senate of

chieftains, before Hugh Capet became king of France.

While in Mediæval feudal Europe the common man was esteemed little better than the beast of burden, the common freeman in Iceland, save for his exclusion from the ruling assemblies, enjoyed equal recognition with any. As the tales of the first settlers were told at the yule-feasts, or in the booths at the Althing, no one's blood flowed in prouder waves than his. They were his countrymen, his kinsmen, his brothers, equal, not superior, in birth-rights. In all the literature of modern Europe, I find nothing that leads me back to nature, into the immediate presence of her rugged primal forms, so directly and entirely as the Old Norse literature, whose almost exclusive home was Iceland. And, to me at least, it seems a source to which it were well for much of our emasculated thought and expression of the present day to turn. But the picture, rude and vigorous, in outline and coloring, of that age, I shall not attempt to hold up before you in these pages.

Iceland's life, as a free state, ceased in 1262-64 through voluntary submission to Norway. All the forms of her democratic state-organization were replaced by crown-offices. Self-government vanished, and with it died the Norse buoyancy of spirit and dauntless energy. The six centuries following upon the union with Norway are essentially barren of interest. Without unfolding the volume of her records during that long period, we turn therefore to the Iceland of to-day.

And now I shall invite you to embark with me upon the *Laura*, the larger of two Royal Danish mail-steamers plying between Copenhagen, the Faroe Islands and

Iceland. Arriving late in the evening on the "Flying Scotchman," the beautiful city of Edinburgh retains us only for an hour.

The chasteness of its architectural lines, the charm of its clean, broad streets, the quiet coloring of its drab and grey buildings, the lyric poetry of its myriad squares and of the thickly-foliaged slopes, that descend so precipitously into its picturesque ravines, the grand hill-fortress crowning all, a mediæval heroic epic in stone seen for a moment, leave upon the retina an impression of civilized life and of art, that will rise ever and again, in vivid contrast, in presence of the scenes of the northern world. At day-break we are off the eastern coast of Scotland, a line dim and low in the distance, lost wherever a deeper bay indents the shore. The Orkneys enveloped in mists are half-seen, and then the eye turns ever northward, seeking to glide between sky and sea, and grasp at last the dream realized, incorporate, of this northern world. For however so wide one's journeyings, when the keel leaves the beaten ocean track, there is a sense of penetrating an unknown, only half-discovered region.

On the third morning, the mate tells us that land is in sight. In the midst of the North Atlantic rises that picturesque group of rocky islets known as the Faroe Islands. The equatorial stream, pressing northward, with its accompanying warm currents of air, heavily charged with vapors, finds its course suddenly barred by an irregular line of stone fortresses. The heavy air seeks in vain to pass their crests and, in sluggish trailing fog and dissolving cloud, the south winds leave half their burden behind. The Faroese hopefulness finds

notwithstanding expression in the title of one of their two weekly publications—*Dimmaletting*—the lifting of the fog. And nature were chary indeed, if she responded not at all to such persistent good will. So at times, she is said to draw aside the fog-curtain and reward the faith of the islanders with fleeting glimpses of the sun. As we wind out and in among the fjords, we rarely, if ever, escape the impression of being in mid-ocean. The Rhine and Hudson, on their way seaward, at times are pressed closely by vine or forest-clad hills, and the traveller's eye is charmed with the gentle, refined grandeur of the scene.

Broaden the river bed fourfold ; strip the mountains of their verdure ; leave them naught but bare rocks, cut seaward in precipices of several hundred feet, and lift them to a frowning fog-mantled height of from two to three thousand feet.

And, for the poetry of mediæval castle or modern chateau, con over in memory the songs and tales of the Vikings, who, through these winding ocean-rivers, turned homeward from some piratic foray, or swept seaward to win name and booty. You hear again their voices joining in some wild, harsh, strong, alliterated pæan of battle and victory ; you see the broken, cold, grey-blue of the fjord cut into glittering foam by the sharp keels, pressed onward with the sinewy strength of proudly-rhythmed Norse oars. Emerging from the fjord, we are at once in mid-ocean. And, as the rugged, tempest-scarred battlements shroud themselves quickly in the fog and night, it is as though we had awakened from a vivid dream of Viking-times.

Iceland was discovered by a Norse sea rover, Naddodd, who,* while seeking the Faroe Islands, was driven out of his course. Our ship's head is now turned in that direction and, for two days still, we shall have only the larger and stronger-winged sea-fowl of the North Atlantic, to indicate to us that we are treading unaccustomed water ways. Like everything animate and inanimate here, the breath of the storm has passed over them, the ruggedness of primitive nature has been infused into them. Or, is it only our enkindled fancy, for they seem to buffet the air with more of conscious strength, and to extend over the darkened sea a broader expanse of white and grey wings. Late in the afternoon of the third day, low precipitous crags are in sight.

Indeed, for some hours previous, the clouds to the north have defined, without disclosing, save to willing imaginations, the forms of that broad system of glaciers that occupies the south-east of Iceland, the Vatnajökull (glacier of waters). The crags in front are the outlying islets of the Westmanna group. When Ingolf, in the last quarter of the ninth century, set sail for Iceland to effect the first permanent Norse settlement, he had as companion Hjørleif, a sword-brother and husband of his sister. The pious Ingolf offered sacrifices to the gods and, when off the south-east coast, threw the pillars of his high seat into the sea. As the waves received them, the devout Norseman promised Odin or Thor, that he would dwell where the pillars, divinely guided, were cast ashore. But Hjørleif made no sacrifice, threw overboard no pillars for winds and waves to

*Latter half of ninth century.

toy with, but self-reliant, took land where it seemed good to him. He, who recognized the overruling hand of the gods, became the father of the Icelandic community, and the desolate shore, upon which his pillars were left by the receding waves, is now occupied by the wharves of Reykjavik.

But Hjørleif fell beneath the murderous hands of his thralls, West-men, Celts, who fled to the islands lying perhaps half a-dozen leagues off the coast, but escaped not the avenging hand of Ingolf. The group bears their name, being called the islands of the West-men. As we draw nearer, we remark that the brown and the iron grey of the rock is curiously seamed and dotted with white. Approaching still nearer, the seams disintegrate, the spots disappear and, in their stead, the whole air in front of the crags is sown with countless, glancing wings. As when cold, light snow flakes, lazily falling through the still interspaces of air, are seized by a passing gust and, in a confused whirl, circle in and out, now massed, now separate.

The steam-whistle shrilly signals our approach. And, at once, from their perches upon the cliffs, from their circlings in mid-air, the gulls, the guillemots, the auks, the puffins and myriad other sea-birds I do not recognize, sweep outward and upward from the ship, forming, as it were, the lower curve of an ellipse of white whirring wings. And, as the impelling fear loses its force and the desire for the nest or for repose strengthens, the ellipse curves backward, an almost unbroken arch. A second blast—the air is filled with a confusion of glancing wings. Then the resonant cliffs become silent as before and, through the air, as fall the snow flakes when

the gust has passed, descend on fluttering wings the birds, each returning again to his perch.

The anchor is weighed and, with the afternoon, the clouds lift, and we see the surf beating and breaking upon the south-west coast of Iceland. As day descends, the clouds and vapors, floating in mid-air, vanish.

To enter the Faxa Bay at night, when summer reigns and the air has the crisp clearness of a morning in the Alps, is to turn a new page in the book of nature. * Day has only departed for perhaps three hours, and her throne is held by a presence that delights in mellow radiance. The clouds are glowing with the living colors of the first hues of sunset, or the last before sunrise. The sea is smooth as a lake and all about mountains rise, softened in their forms, harmonized in their coloring into perfect accord with the chaste beauty of the whole. Towards delicately flushed mountains, beneath a pellucid sky, over a whispering sea, with an horizon girdle of glowing clouds about us, we approach the goal of our journeying.

Were the whole of Europe to be compared to the human body, I should conceive of France as the throbbing heart, of Germany as the brooding intellect, of England as the active hand. Such a distinction of functions, in the economy of European state life, is, I need not remark, only defensible as a perhaps suggestive figure. In 1789, 1830 and 1848, the quickened pulsation of France, that enkindling of hopes and their partial fruition, was communicated to all Europe. There is always and everywhere, in enthusiasm, a spirit of generosity, whose wide-reaching effects survive long

*Longest day in Reykjavik, 20 hours, 54 minutes ; shortest, 3 hours, 58 minutes.

after the source from which they flowed has become chilled into indifference, or even despair. The rebirth, politically, of Iceland can thus be traced back to the movements of 1830 and 1848. With 1830 that political agitation began in Denmark, which fostered and prepared the way for the present partial independence of Iceland. And there came, in the midst of that struggle, a moment rich in dramatic interest, recalling that other pregnant moment in 1789 when Mirabeau, in the name of the French Assembly, declared to the royal representative, who had ordered the delegates to disperse, "We will yield our places only to the bayonets."

In 1851, a national assembly had been convened in Reykjavik to consider and report a plan for the future relations of the island to Denmark.

A proposition, drawn in Denmark, had been presented, but it did not secure the desired autonomy.

Under the leadership of Jón Sigurdsson, the delegates brought in, therefore, a new bill. The royal commissioner, having sought in vain by censure and by the presence of Danish soldiery to overawe the assembly, declared it dissolved. Thereupon Jón Sigurdsson rose and said: "I protest in the name of the king and the people against this proceeding," and the members rising, with almost one voice, responded: "We all protest."

Honor, the highest human honor, to Jón Sigurdsson, whose patient, persistent patriotism, wise counsels and unselfish life accomplished for Iceland what others have effected in larger spheres for other communities. He is their peer in all that constitutes manliness, for, not the opportunity nor the gift, but the use thereof, determines the measure of human worth.

Out of the long struggle came first, in 1854, free trade, or what is essentially equivalent thereto, and in 1874, the millennial anniversary of the settlement of the island by Ingolf, Christian the IX. brought to Iceland her present constitution.

A minister for Icelandic affairs resides in Copenhagen, and forms the medium of communication between the dependent state and the King of Denmark. Administratively, the island is controlled by a governor, two vice-governors (*Amtmenn*), and eighteen provincial magistrates (*Syslumenn*).

Under these again we have officials in charge of the poor-rate districts or "rapes" (the *Hreppstjorar*). The local magistrates from the *amtmen*, or vice-governors, down, are assisted in the discharge of their functions by advisory boards. So far as I have been able to ascertain, however, all offices in the civil service are conferred by appointment, save those of certain of these counsellors, who are named by popular suffrage.

The *syslumenn* fill, like a certain Chinese dignitary, known to operatic fame, all offices; they are collectors of taxes, bailiffs, auctioneers, judges of first instance, etc. From their decisions an appeal can be made to a superior court of three judges, sitting in Reykjavik, and from this in turn to Copenhagen.

The *Althing*, or parliament, shares with the king the power of law-giving and has exclusive right of taxation. No law, however, is valid, unless it is sanctioned by the king.

Iceland receives from the Danish treasury a fixed annual allowance of 60,000 crowns, £3,333½, as indemnity for losses sustained in consequence of the royal

confiscations at the time of the Reformation, and of the ruinously oppressive royal monopoly that held in full force until 1786. The island returns nothing in taxes, and is exempted from military obligations.

The Althing sits biennially in two chambers; an upper house of six members, appointed by the king, and six elected by the people, and a lower of twenty-four popular representatives. The Church forms also part of the state organization.

Iceland is divided ecclesiastically into one bishopric, 20 deaneries and 299 parishes, with (in 1888) 141 livings. Bishop and deans are appointed. Priests are chosen in this wise: Three candidates are sent, by the governor, and of these three the parish chooses one, who is thereupon confirmed by the bishop.

Livings, however, which yield an annual income of over 1,800 crowns (\$500), are conferred by the king.

The state Church is Lutheran, but since 1874 religious freedom obtains. In 1880 there were 12 inhabitants who did not accept the Lutheran confession, including 1 Catholic, 1 Methodist, 4 Unitarians, 3 Mormons, and 3 without stated belief.

The state also cares for the bodily welfare of its citizens. There is a "landlaeknir," chief physician, resident in Reykjavik, who is appointed by the king, and some twenty-five physicians, assigned by the governor to different localities. These are subject to the visitatorial inspection of their chief.

The clergy, save the bishop, are dependent upon their prebends, upon tithes and perquisites; the physicians are enrolled in the civil list and also, I understand, are recipients of certain fees.

The governor's salary, including special appropriations for secretary, etc., is \$3,450; the bishop's, \$2,225.

Educationally, the university grade of instruction is represented by two faculties at Reykjavik, medicine and theology, from which the staff of priests and physicians is constantly recruited. Beneath these stands the Latin school, corresponding to the German gymnasium. There is also an institution in the north, at Möðruvellir, near Akreyri, which corresponds to the German Real-Schule.

My host and friend, Dean Thorarinn Bodvarsson, has also founded, in memory of a beloved son, an institution of higher general training for lads at Hafnarfjörður, near Reykjavik. These latter schools attract comparatively few pupils; the Latin school is, however, well attended. There, are besides, four girls' schools, three in the north and one at Reykjavik, in which a certain general instruction in history, geography, arithmetic, etc., and the housewifely occupations is given, but here again to very few pupils.

Elementary instruction in the few towns is cared for in schools; in the country by the parents, the priests or private teachers. For confirmation an ability to read and write is required.

The population of the island, according to the census of 1888, was 69,224; of Reykjavik 3,599; of Isafjörður, the second town in size, 692; of the five largest settlements, excluding Reykjavik, 2,761. In three years the population has decreased by about one-thirtieth. This is due to emigration. The vast majority of the inhabitants are distributed in isolated farms, occupying the narrow belt girding the waste central plateau.

In general it may be said that these farms are hardly

more numerous than villages in the more thickly settled countries of the Old and New Worlds.

We are wont to think of Iceland as an exceedingly remote region, and yet it is only 500 miles distant from Scotland, 600 from Norway. It has a superficial area of 39,200 square miles, being thus about four-fifths as large as the State of New York.

Its greatest length is 300 miles, its greatest breadth 200. Two fifths of the island are said to be habitable, nearly one-fourth entirely waste. The traveller's impressions would enlarge the latter fraction at the expense of the former. While lying only just below the Arctic circle, owing to the equatorial currents and its insular position, the range of variation in the temperature is limited, and the extreme of cold far less than we should imagine from its proximity to Greenland. The mean temperature of the year in Reykjavik is 38° Fahrenheit, of the summer 54°; in Grimsey, in the extreme north, the yearly average is 34½°.

Iceland has no manufactories.

Its population along the sea-board depends upon the fisheries, in the interior valleys mainly upon sheep-raising. Its exports are fish, oil, sheep, salted meat, lamb-skins, ponies, eider-down, feathers, and a certain quantity of mittens woven from the Icelandic wool.

A witty Scotchman whom we knew in Reykjavik, an ancient mariner of kindest heart and hand, never mentioned Iceland without styling it—"the God-forgotten country." According to him, when the Divine Being, having completed his work of creation, declared, "It is good;" Satan, standing beside Him, thought, "I too would like to try my hand."

Being accorded permission, at his command Iceland rose from the sea, and his sombre majesty also declared, "it is good."

The island might almost be described as one vast volcano, once submarine and now with myriad sealed craters, behind whose stone doors crouch fiery floods, that at any instant may burst forth anew.

It is formed of basalt, lava and ashes. The east and west fjords, the oldest parts of the island, are constructed almost entirely of strata of basalt, placed the one above the other. The centre of the island, especially the central plateau, upon which the glacial mountains (the Jökla) rest, consists in great part of tufa, a composite formation of hardened volcanic ashes and sand, resulting apparently from eruptions and accumulations at the bottom of the sea. From this highland rise those sharp peaks of lava and of white or red trachyte, that, at a more recent period, broke through the tufa-crust.

In the cooling of the basalt deposits, frequently great clefts were formed and, through these, the volcanic fire could easily rise to the surface. The diversity in geological character between the different parts of the island has determined its varying physical aspects. Where the basalt predominates, the water has, as it were, been forced to hew its way over or through iron barriers, and precipitous crags and irregular fragments of rock mark the course of the streams and the lines of the bays. Where the softer tufa occurs, broad valleys, gentle slopes and rounded elevations result.

The island rose gradually from the sea, and, in the Miocene period, had a climate and vegetation re-

sembling those of Central America (Florida and Mexico), to-day.

The glacial age came to Iceland as to all northern lands, and, as the ice melted, the island began to assume its present appearance.

The lava beds that cover such vast areas, in part antedate the ice-age, but are in the main of more recent origin. The earlier lava streams were, of course, in many cases smoothed and filled up by glacial action. The formation of peat-bogs from the vegetation, and of soil from the clay deposited by the glaciers had the same history here as elsewhere. Since the settlement of the island in *circa* 870, there has been very little change in the physical conditions. Glaciers, *i. e.*, glacial mountains, occupy nearly one-seventh of the entire superficies. The Vatnajökull alone covers an area of about 3,200 square miles.

Volcanic eruptions are known to have occurred during the last 1,000 years in some 20 different places, but many outbreaks passed unobserved, since their fury was expended upon the desolate central regions. We have evidence of 18 eruptions of Hekla since 1104.

In 1783, from the Skapta-jökull two streams of lava issued, the one 50 miles in length, from 10 to 12 miles in breadth and 100 feet in depth, the other 40 miles in length and 7 in breadth. An area of 420 square miles was covered. One-sixth of the inhabitants and one-half of the live stock are said to have perished, as direct or indirect consequence of this outbreak ; though this official estimate is declared by some to be an exaggeration. *

* Poestion (Island, page 119) gives as dimensions of streams : First stream, length 10-11 Danish miles, greatest breadth 3 miles ; second stream, length 9 miles,

Iceland has essentially no mineral wealth—iron, copper in small quantities, Icelandic spar, aluminum and coal exist in one or more localities, but apparently not in sufficient quantities, save the spar, to repay working. Lignite also occurs, and sulphur in extensive deposits. The latter may at some time attract and repay foreign energy and capital.

Away now from statistics to the presence and friendly hand-clasping of the people, and to communing with that bleak northern nature.

No forest will limit our vision, as it is sent forth upon every radial line to the encircling horizon. For Iceland never produced anything save low stunted trees, even in the ninth century, if we can trust the record of the trunks, that the soil has mummified; and to-day the Icelandic “*skóg*” (forest), translated into terms of an English landscape, means this: Low birch, willow, or juniper bushes, in rare localities, form thin groves with an average height of perhaps 8 to 12 feet;* elsewhere they crouch earthward like poor hunchbacks, or, if timidly and feebly venturing skyward, allow often the wild geranium to rest the fresher green of its leaves and stalk against their seared stems and fluttering foliage, while its purple cup, lifted high above their crests, quaffs unhindered the wine of air and sunlight, and nods a bold and blithe welcome to bird and insect.

breadth 2 miles. Depth of lava, in places 500–600 feet; in the plains, however, not above 20 feet. A Danish mile equals 4.6812 English miles. The official reports give losses as follows: 9336 men, 28,000 horses, 11,461 cattle, 190,488 sheep.

* Kaalund. “*Bidrag til en historisk-topografisk Beskrivelse af Island*,” Vol. II., p. 143, speaks of a grove where trees reach a height of from 16½ to 18½ feet. Personally I never saw, outside of Akreyri, a bush above 7 feet in height, but I did not visit the few most important forests of Iceland.—(C. S. S.)

One meets everywhere with open-hearted, free-handed hospitality, honest, intelligent, but heavy, careworn and rather downcast faces. None of the Anglo-Saxon push, or the French *esprit*, fire eye and steps ; but there is a patient plodding expression and carriage ; the horizon, material and spiritual, is a very narrow one. The son cannot rise in fortunes much above the level of the father.

He might do so, or a later generation might, if he would emigrate ; but love of country is strong.

The degenerate Greek is said to loiter all day about the cafés, an idler and good-for-naught, swollen with pride in an ancestry to whom the world will always owe an incalculable debt, for its eager endeavor, that reverent search for and loving recognition of the true and beautiful.

But they are not his ancestors, they are ours. The worker and producer enters by divine right into the exclusive heritage of all the working past. The Iclander, proud of that heroic past of Saga times, that bloody, cruel past, whose memories he cons over in the hours of enforced or induced idleness, is loth to follow where Leif and others his landsmen, nine centuries ago, marked out the way. His language is pure from foreign admixture, from weakening contractions and loss of grammatical flexions, pure as no idiom of cultivated central Europe. He will hold to the ancestral heritage, in soil, speech and customs, and the world without can "gang its ain gait." Well, if he has degenerated, as we at least are convinced that he has, in energy, in enthusiasm, in that adventurous spirit, which always is pushing back the visible horizon,

and at times with such energy that, as with a Leif and a Columbus, the diaphanous veil is dissipated and a new world revealed; if the internal qualities and the external material conditions have deteriorated in many respects, the old Norse welcome is just as hearty as ever, and the home, be it a turf-walled, peat-reeking hut, or a roomy, comfortable frame house, has its door standing always wide open to the stranger.

The towns are fishing hamlets, with a certain added gentility and scholarly culture, diffused from and within the educated circles.

But the typical Icelandic life of to-day is not to be found here. We must wander away to the home of some farmer, be he rector or husbandman (*bóndi*), and, in his simple study at nightfall, or, leaning upon the turf-wall surrounding his domicile, at the hour when the sheep are returning from the mountain pastures to right and left of the valley, win our way into his confidence. He will not have much to tell us. Little that would appeal to us beckons from his present or his future, but honest faithfulness, in the midst of a very narrow circle of duties and possibilities, is his approved claim to our hearty respect.

At times we shall meet men whom contact with the outer world has transformed.

They will display, perhaps, the urbanity of a cultured scholar or the ready wit of a French "*causeur*;" but these travelled tillers of the soil are few and rare.

To watch at daybreak his servant, or son, or daughter leading the sheep away to the hills; to perform the rude services demanded by his simple stock-farm; to shoe his horses and repair his tools in his own smithy,

and, when the meadow grass is a few inches in length, to go forth with his farm-hands and swing in quick, straight lines, not in long, slow, rhythmic curves, his straight, short-bladed scythe; to load the hay upon his ponies, or watch by the barn entrance while they return with their evenly-balanced hundred-weights, and estimate thereby the year's fruitfulness; to carry the products of his dairy and farm, butter, cheese, hay, cured meat, etc., to the towns and there exchange them for coffee, sugar, grain or boards, or, perchance, some womanly vanities for the good housewife; to join with his neighbors in the folk-sports of wrestling, etc., what time the sheep are collected from the high mountain pastures; to read aloud in the winter-days from the old sagas or from some book of devotions the while the women spin—such is the round of his duties and vocations.

When a wayfarer on horseback approaches, he will go forth to meet and welcome him and, a half hour later, over a cup of chocolate or coffee, with a little glass of liqueur, they will exchange their budgets of gossip. But, while we have been lingering with the farmer, interchanging news from the wide outer world for facts and fancies woven from the life of this narrower circle, the good-wife has been bending over the glowing bed of peat-cinders, preparing our breakfast.

It is early August and the succulent ribs of the mountain-pastured lamb would tempt even an epicure, despite the rudeness of cloth and table-furnishings. Fastidious appetites, however, would go a-fasting here, unless stimulated into common sense activity by the invigorating qualities of this northern air and scenery.

For, not merely the inferior quality of the viands, save the lamb and milk, and the absence of variety characterize, of necessity, the farmer's table ; but also, far too frequently, there is an entire lack of domestic and personal neatness.

The transparent purity of the atmosphere and the sparkling clearness of the brooks and rivulets, that pass their very doors, should suggest to this island people the thought of suffering the air indoors to become as free from pollution, as that without, and holding their life, on its physical side, as clear from soil as the water of their mountain springs. But to-day the indifference of these Icelandic farmers, as a class, to neatness offends every sense as well as every hygienic law. The good farm, whose turf-roof covers us, forms, however, we assume, an honorable exception to the rule. Though our host may only have two tumblers in his china-closet and our party must therefore imitate elder days and pass the horn, a prosaic horn, from hand to hand, as we quaff the abundant milk, every thing indoors is as neat and wholesome as conditions permit. After breakfast, having taken a last look about the low guest room, where chests supply largely the place of chairs, and a rude table and bed and small hanging book-shelf, with its rows of well worn, brown-backed volumes of sagas and books of devotion, complete the inventory ; we pass through the dark narrow passage-way and, stooping at the low entrance, find ourselves again in the open air.

Our ponies are all in readiness, we mount, call out as farewell to host and hostess, "be ye blessed," and ride away.

The farm-stead, with its line of low structures, turf-

walled and roofed, with white wood gables facing the outer world, will long remain in sight, commanding the valley from its little knoll. The "tún," or home-field, is enclosed between broad, low walls of turf and a bridle-path, similarly walled, conducts us across it and out into "no-man's land." For certainly I cannot conceive of any one desiring to lay claim to the desolate, hopelessly desolate, infinite expanses of barrenness, that press so closely upon the oases of the farms.

Away then out into this world of Iceland.

We have steeds beneath us that are as swift as thought and as wayward as fancy. They are thought and fancy turning backward to linger, or hasten, amidst scenes that once impressed the willing senses. Come then and wander with me upon such coursers hither and thither about Iceland.

We are traversing the south-western peninsula, at a leisurely pace. At nine o'clock A. M. we had our first meal and, with a few cheese sandwiches in the saddlebags of the good Dean, our guide and host, we expect to endure until the twelve-hour sand-glass is turned.

Our party consists of three, the Dean, an Icelandic lad and an American. We have clattered over, or painfully clambered over, lava streams *ad infinitum*, struggled through broad, deep stretches of sand and driven our ponies at a mad pace over every kind of track, save a smooth hard meadow.

We have forded rivers and scaled mountains, and learned meantime a few strophes from an Icelandic song, descriptive of the Fatherland.

We are now in a particularly desolate region, a valley of sand, high up among the hills, surrounded on all

sides by conical elevations of sand, ashes and other volcanic deposits.

The two younger members of the party are tempted to test their ponies' mettle and, dashing with wild halloo down the steep slopes, reply somewhat tauntingly to the Dean, who urges greater forbearance. "Well, I'll set the pace," he retorts, and away he flies on his squarely-built grey charger, leaving our panting ponies far in the rear. Up the hill-side we clamber over lava-fragments of every color, grey, yellow, purple, iridescent, from opaque almost to transparent, and with pink and white flowerets strewn here and there.

But, long before the hill-crest is gained, we are sedately moving, in slow and single file, the Dean leading. A moment later, and the eastward side of the rib of mountains, that we are crossing, slopes away from us down into the valley, many hundreds of feet below.

The sea stretches cold and blue far away to the southward. And beneath us winds in and out a valley, narrow or broadening as the boundary hills permit, dividing northward into separate arms, and lost to sight, where it curves behind a distant projecting spur.

It is a wide valley, resembling in its contours many a grass-carpeted vale, where we have seen farms and rectories clinging to the base of the hills, or perched on little knolls, mid-plain, whence to overlook their domain of meadow and pasture-land, and lure homeward at nightfall the shepherd and sheep.

But a river has filled it all, a deep, strong, angry river of molten lava and, over yon slope, it has poured into the sea. The bordering hills are all seared and blasted, as if from the breath of a furnace, and the

conical mountains, pressing each other all about, are extinct volcanoes. It does not require a very vivid imagination to remove the seal of death from this stream. For the waves, even as they broke high in air, were transformed into sharply serrated ridges of stone, and the eager surf, chafing against the border walls, became heavy and congealed, ere it could shrink back into the river-bed. What an inferno of flame and noisome exhalations must have risen from this immense moving caldron, to blast and blacken the light of day!

Yet it is but one of a number of these lava valleys that our ponies must cross to-day. Thorvaldr Thoroddson counted in this peninsula alone 300 volcanoes, with some 800 distinct craters.

And summer is so brief here that, even in a thousand years, nature has not been able to repair the ravages of that remote chaotic upheaval. Flinty and almost as barren as at the first of even a blade of vegetation, many of these rigid rivers remain even to-day; over others time has spread a grey veil of lichens, and others still have perhaps disintegrated slightly, or, more probably, have jealously guarded the few grains of soil, lifted mid-air by the winds and thence descending, as a scant fertilizing shower, upon their barren crags. Ere long, the same forethoughtful winds, loving to beautify nature's waste places, let fall seeds; or strong-winged birds forgot, in the joy of wild responsive cries, the grains they were bearing to their rocky eyries.

These seeds fall not all on stony places. And so, when June reaches Iceland, were it not that the physical vision is dulled and blinded to the most beautiful and wonderful things that are taking place about us, a

breath of spring might be seen, just touching the lava crests, and, in white and yellow flowerets, leaving turned a page of nature's book. As we pass, we read, and hope shoots forth anew her timid spires in the waste places, if such there be, of our present and future.

Pass, oh picture, left upon the memory by the volcanic world of the south-west, and give place to the impressions traced by the scenes and experiences of the central desert.

The party is in number the same, but the good Dean is in his quiet rectory at Garthar, that looks down over an enclosed rectangle of grave-mounds at the blue bay of Hafnarfjörthr, and beyond at the sombre line of volcanic peaks, rising forth from the midst of that desolation of the south-west. The two companions of the American are young Icelandic pedagogues, on their way to their northern homes.

Since leaving Reykjavik we have seen little but waste land.

Heath (heithi) in Iceland means a region of sand-hills where at times a coarse grass or wild grain strives to grow, but with scant encouragement, and we have been on heath moorland or lava now for more than two days.

Here and there, in the river bottoms, or in the sheltered nooks hollowed out by some kindly providence in the leeward slopes of the hills, we have found pasturage for our ponies. We have visited the Thingfields, site of the old Icelandic Parliament, the levelled bed of an ancient lava stream of immense breadth.

A section thereof four miles in width has become depressed, probably through some later seismic action,

and the high lateral walls have cloven apart, forming on both sides very impressive ravines, several miles in length.

The most famous and magnificent of the two is known as the Almannagjá, or public rift. Its higher or western wall has an average height of from 80 to 100* feet, and the lateral fractures are so even and regular that the various sections of the wall seem to have been laid in their places by the hands of some northern Anaks.

The old lava-stream, now thinly draped with a coarse herbage, and a ragged, dwarfed forest, has nothing in common with the lava rivers of the south ; there is no fierce commotion here ; no suggestion of a confined, chafing flood, in the moment of its uttermost wrath, instantly frozen by the fiat of omnipotence ; but a broad, low, tranquil upheaval, resembling the calm, vast breathing of the ocean, when in repose.

Leaving the historic Thingfields behind, we traversed Kaldi-dalr, the cold valley, where glacier-hooded volcanoes closely confine the path, a narrow desolate pass, that forms, as it were, an entrance-aisle to the high central desert. And now we are on the borders of this desert, where nothing grows, the broad volcanic plateau, that, in an irregular ellipse, occupies the whole centre of Iceland. Huge blocks and fragments of lava are strewn all about us, at first suggesting ruins of some prehistoric, cyclopean structures. To these succeed smaller fragments, about the size and form of paving-stones, and then only a coarse, heavy sand. As far as

* Preyer and Zirkel (Reise nach Island) give height as in places far more than 100 feet, in others from 30 to 40.

the eye can send forth its messengers, only vast undulations of sand. Not far away, out of the sand-plateau, rises a ridge, dun, smoke-colored, with patches of begrimed snow or ice, lurking in its hollowed crests or lateral ravines. We do not wonder at the folk credulousness that has peopled this uncanny region with a race of mysterious outlaws. A desert were drear enough, but a desert out of which rise volcanoes, or ridges of volcanic ejections, and that combines with the sombre hues and influence of a chilled furnace the icy gloom of an arctic region, is repellent enough to every life throb, to awaken a sentiment of almost shrinking fear. As night comes on, the desert still stretches before us limitless, and the fog shrouds in ghostly robes the dead hills and mountains. At nine o'clock the moon rises, and casts a weird, chilling light over the landscape.

The dun volumes of fog press close upon her, seeking to dull her beams in sombre whirls of smoke, and, bolder grown, dare once and again to thrust a fog-shield between her face and the earth. The moon's struggle is a futile one, the fog-hosts are too densely marshalled.

Yet another and another fog-shield is thrust before the moon, and the circle of her influence is constantly lessened. At last we see her no more, and now, in troops, the fog goes hurrying past and descends ever lower, closer upon the earth. We are their lawful prey, for night has overtaken us upon the desert. We feel their chill, moist touch upon our cheeks, and cannot see our free horses running on before. But merrily we sing, and swinging the Icelandic whip, with loud halloos, urge our ponies ever onward. Indian fashion, we hang almost over their sides, seeking to gather up, as it were,

the scant atoms of light and discover with their aid traces of a hoof-mark.

And so, although we must pass the night, bivouacked within the fog realm, since we at last lose our way, we gain, nevertheless, a pasturage for our famished ponies, and by the next noon, can look back from the safe shelter of a farm house north of the plateau upon the region we have escaped.

The highlands are all shrouded in cloud and over their slopes hang and drift fringes of fog, as though the spirits of the mountains were still watching us, loth to admit their final defeat.

Were an hour infinitely expansible we might continue, yet for a long time, our Icelandic rambles.

But, if we arrest the pendulum, the sun unresting will mock at our impotent efforts in self-deception. Quickly then, that, at least in glimpses, a few scenes may still pass before us. Place yourself at your good pleasure almost anywhere in western Iceland, and, if the summer day be fine, the air will be as invigorating as in our crisp autumn days—the sky as clear as that of the high Alps. Hills near or far, never very remote, will bound the horizon, and, very probably, the truncated, conical forms of one or more will suggest their volcanic nature. Fragments of old lava, pierced with holes as if worm-eaten, will lie within sight, if not within hand-reach.

Perhaps a grassy meadow will stretch away from you and, at its farther end, a white or weather-blackened farm-stead or church rise.

An eagle or hawk may be floating mid-air, while, from projecting boulders, the curlew and ptarmigan are watching your movements, or sidling across your path,

to lure you away from their haunts. At times, in more isolated ponds, you can witness a gracious, domestic scene from nature; the stately swans protecting their beloved cygnet, as they glide swiftly away, father and mother with the child between.

If you would listen to the roar of thronging waters, many a river of Iceland, emerging from the melting snow-banks and glaciers of the highlands, must move in rapid course and in bold plunge before it can gain the placid level of the sea-plains. And where the volumed, sonorous waters descend in massive, blue, translucent curves, or white, foaming, rainbow-tinted, broken columns, far from human abode, with no sight or sound of tree or bird to call your thoughts away, you can converse with the presence that speaks to you from the waterfall. And, from the spray-bathed, crumbling cliffs, or amidst the green spires, carpeting the ledge that overlooks the caldron, you can gather one and another of the fairest, most delicately-petalled and hued of northern flowers.

If you would visit Hekla, wait at its base until every cloud has slunk away below the horizon and the wind is stilled, or clouds and sand storms will obscure the view, and all you will have for your pains will be the impressions and weariness of an arduous climb and a dim, fleeting picture of craters, filled with snow and walled with grey, yellow and purple-tinted accumulations of ashes, sand and slag.

The geysers are but one group, the principal one, of the manifold hot springs that escape the earth in all parts of Iceland.

Their force is becoming, however, gradually spent; an eruption of the Great Geyser does not occur oftener now

than once in ten days, and only a persistent traveller would remain tented upon that barren spot longer than forty-eight hours. Hence that display is rarely witnessed by visitors.

We have returned to Reykjavik, and are steaming away with the *Laura*.

As we bid good-bye to Iceland, a low, trembling arch of light spans the night-sky.

The Aurora-Borealis will soon span this northern firmament with many an arch of greater brilliancy, and there will be war in heaven and hosts of invisible warriors, with glittering lances, move to and fro, and the west be suffused with blood or all ablaze, as when Surtr, the god of fire, shall cross the divine bridge to destroy Valhalla and the elder gods in Ragnarök, but we shall be far away, beneath duller skies, but within more congenial, more generous surroundings.

Before the prow turns finally southward, we skirt the coast and touch at one of the eastern ports, Seyðisfjörður. The character of the water ways and of their guardian mountains has changed; not broad-mouthed fjords as in the west and north, but long, narrow, winding channels indent the coast, recalling in a measure those of the Faroe Islands.

The mountains too, rise more precipitously from the sea and in magnificent strata, poised one upon the other like a series of tables, or a giant-stair.

There are no indications here of recent volcanic action; the mountains are compact and iron-hued, not loose heaps of volcanic products, such as we have often seen in the west and centre. As we weigh anchor and the shores recede, some Icelandic students, on their way to

Copenhagen, shout their affectionate and proud farewell in the national anthem :

Oh, Iceland, fire's twin-birth,
Belovéd foster earth,
Fair mountain queen ;
Thy sons shall cherish thee,
While land is girt by sea ;
Man to maid bendeth knee,
Sun giveth sheen !

Over the swaying stretches of the North Atlantic, colder, more cheerless, more storm-roused than a three-month since, away to the Faroe Islands again. And one evening, while our boat, sheltered behind the curving shore of a bold headland, waits for the fog to lift, the Faroese peasants on deck join hands and, in a circle, begin their national dance. In slow measure of step and voice, the dance and chant proceed.

It is only a slower, heavier merry-go-round, such as we remember from our boyhood. The words are unintelligible, all save the refrain accompanying each verse, and the Icelanders on board are in equal ignorance. But a Faroese interprets ; 'tis some old folk-tale, transmitted in oral strophes from a remote past. As the song proceeds, the motion becomes more energetic, more varied ; the women remain, however, only solemnly stepping participants.

And, with the fog veiling all of the Faroese mountains, save their base, trailing along the bay and diffusing through the atmosphere as intangible rain, the weird chant draws to its end and, for the last time, we hear that "Guthmundr raedr hvar vith drekkum naesta Jól : " Gudmund decides where we shall drink our next Yule-horn.